

Underground Railroad (Whitehead)

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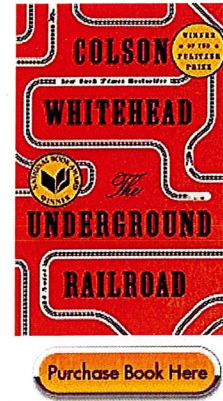
The Underground Railroad

Colson Whitehead, 2016

Knopf Doubleday

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Summary

Winner, 2017 Pulitzer Prize-Fiction

Winner, 2016 National Book Awards

A magnificent tour de force chronicling a young slave's adventures as she makes a desperate bid for freedom in the antebellum South.

Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. Life is hell for all the slaves, but especially bad for Cora; an outcast even among her fellow Africans, she is coming into womanhood—where even greater pain awaits.

When Caesar, a recent arrival from Virginia, tells her about the Underground Railroad, they decide to take a terrifying risk and escape.

Matters do not go as planned—Cora kills a young white boy who tries to capture her. Though they manage to find a station and head north, they are being hunted.

In Whitehead's ingenious conception, the Underground Railroad is no mere metaphor—engineers and conductors operate a secret network of tracks and tunnels beneath the Southern soil. Cora and Caesar's first stop is South Carolina, in a city that initially seems like a haven.

But the city's placid surface masks an insidious scheme designed for its black denizens. And even worse: Ridgeway, the relentless slave catcher, is close on their heels. Forced to flee again, Cora embarks on a harrowing flight, state by state, seeking true freedom.

Like the protagonist of *Gulliver's Travels*, Cora encounters different worlds at each stage of her journey—hers is an odyssey through time as well as space. As Whitehead brilliantly re-creates the unique terrors for black people in the pre-Civil War era, his narrative seamlessly weaves the saga of America from the brutal importation of Africans to the unfulfilled promises of the present day.

The Underground Railroad is at once a kinetic adventure tale of one woman's ferocious will to escape the horrors of bondage and a shattering, powerful meditation on the history we all share. (From the publisher.)

Author Bio

- Birth—November 6, 1969
- Where—New York City, New York (USA)
- Education—B.A., Harvard University
- Awards—PEN/Oakland Award; Whiting Writers Award
- Currently—lives in Brooklyn, New York City, New York

Colson Whitehead is a New York-based novelist and nonfiction works. He was born and raised in New York City, attending attending Trinity, a private prep school, in Manhattan. He graduated from Harvard College in 1991.

Books

After leaving college, Whitehead wrote for *The Village Voice* and while there began working on his novels. His first, *The Institutionalists*, published in 1999, concerned intrigue in the Department of Elevator Inspectors, and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway and a winner of the Quality Paperback Book Club's New Voices Award.

Next came *John Henry Days* in 2001. The novel is an investigation of the steel-driving man of American folklore. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. The novel received the Young Lions Fiction Award and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

The Colossus of New York followed in 2003. A book of essays about the city, it is a meditation on life in Manhattan in the style of E.B. White's well-known essay "Here Is New York." *Colossus* became a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

Apex Hides the Hurt, released in 2006, centers around a fictional "nomenclature consultant" who gets an assignment to name a town. The book earned Whitehead the PEN/Oakland Award.

Sag Harbor, set in 1985, follows a group of teenagers whose families (like Whitehead's own) spend the summer in Sag Harbor, Long Island. Published in 2009, the novel was a finalist for both the PEN/Faulkner award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. In 2010 came *Zone One*, a post-apocalyptic story set New York City.

In 2014 Whitehead published his second work of nonfiction, this one about the 2011 World Series of Poker—*The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky & Death*. Two years later, in 2016, his novel *The Underground Railroad*, was released. Widely acclaimed, many critics agree that it is destined to become an American masterpiece.

In addition to his books, Whitehead's reviews, essays, and fiction have appeared in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *New York Magazine*, *Harper's* and *Granta*, and others.

Teaching and writing

He has taught at Princeton University, New York University, the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, Wesleyan University, and been a Writer-in-Residence at Vassar College, the University of Richmond, and the University of Wyoming.

In the spring of 2015, he joined *The New York Times Magazine* to write a column on language.

Honors

He has received a MacArthur Fellowship, A Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writers Award, the Dos Passos Prize, and a fellowship at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers. (Adapted from the *author's website* (<http://www.colsonwhitehead.com>) and Wikipedia. Retrieved 9/6/2016.)

Book Reviews

[A] potent, almost hallucinatory novel.... It possesses the chilling matter-of-fact power of the slave narratives collected by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s, with echoes of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and brush strokes borrowed from Jorge Luis Borges, Franz Kafka and Jonathan Swift.... He has told a story essential to our understanding of the American past and the American present.

Michiko Kakutani - New York Times

[T]ouches on the historical novel and the slave story, but what it does with those genres is striking and imaginative...carefully built and stunningly daring; it is also, both in expected and unexpected ways, dense, substantial and important.... [Whitehead] opens his eyes where the rest of us would rather look away. In this, *The Underground Railroad* is courageous but never gratuitous.... *The Underground Railroad* becomes something much more interesting than a historical novel. It doesn't merely tell us about what happened; it also tells us what might have happened. Whitehead's imagination, unconstrained by stubborn facts, takes the novel to new places in the narrative of slavery, or rather to places where it actually has something new to say. If the role of the novel, as Milan Kundera argues in a beautiful essay, is to say what only the novel can say, *The Underground Railroad* achieves the task by small shifts in perspective: It moves a couple of feet to one side, and suddenly there are strange skyscrapers on the ground of the American South and a railroad running under it, and the novel is taking us somewhere we have never been before....*The Underground Railroad* is Whitehead's...attempt at getting things right, not by telling us what we already know but by vindicating the powers of fiction to interpret the world. In its exploration of the foundational sins of

America, it is a brave and necessary book.

Juan Gabriel Vasquez - New York Times Book Review

Far and away the most anticipated literary novel of the year, *The Underground Railroad* marks a new triumph for Whitehead.... [A] book that resonates with deep emotional timbre. *The Underground Railroad* reanimates the slave narrative, disrupts our settled sense of the past and stretches the ligaments of history right into our own era.... The canon of essential novels about America's peculiar institution just grew by one.

Ron Charles - Washington Post

With this novel, Colson Whitehead proves that he belongs on any short list of America's greatest authors—his talent and range are beyond impressive and impossible to ignore. *The Underground Railroad* is an American masterpiece, as much a searing document of a cruel history as a uniquely brilliant work of fiction.

Michael Schaub - NPR

[T]hink Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), Alex Haley (*Roots*); think *12 Years a Slave*...[A]n electrifying novel...a great adventure tale, teeming with memorable characters.... Tense, graphic, uplifting and informed, this is a story to share and remember (*Book of the Week*).

People

(*Starred review.*) "Each thing had a value... In America the quirk was that people were things." So observes Ajarry, taken from Africa as a girl in the mid-18th century to be sold and resold and sold again.... The story is literature at its finest and history at its most barbaric. Would that this novel were required reading for every American citizen.

Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review.*) Whitehead...puts escaped slaves Cora and Caesar on what is literally an underground railroad, using such brief magical realist touches to enhance our understanding of the African American experience.... [He] continues ratcheting up both imagery and tension.... [A] work that raises the bar for fiction addressing slavery. —Barbara Hoffert

Library Journal

(*Starred review.*) Imagine a runaway slave novel written with Joseph Heller's deadpan voice leasing both Frederick Douglass' grim realities and H.P. Lovecraft's

rococo fantasies...and that's when you begin to understand how startlingly original this book is.... [Whitehead] is now assuredly a writer of the first rank.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. How does the depiction of slavery in *The Underground Railroad* compare to other depictions in literature and film?
2. The scenes on Randall's plantation are horrific—how did the writing affect you as a reader?
3. In North Carolina, institutions like doctor's offices and museums that were supposed to help "black uplift" were corrupt and unethical. How do Cora's challenges in North Carolina mirror what America is still struggling with today?
4. Cora constructs elaborate daydreams about her life as a free woman and dedicates herself to reading and expanding her education. What role do you think stories play for Cora and other travelers using the underground railroad?
5. "The treasure, of course, was the underground railroad.... Some might call freedom the dearest currency of all." How does this quote shape the story for you?
6. How does Ethel's backstory, her relationship with slavery, and Cora's use of her home affect you?
7. What are your impressions of John Valentine's vision for the farm?
8. When speaking of Valentine's Farm, Cora explains "Even if the adults were free of the shackles that held them fast, bondage had stolen too much time. Only the children could take full advantage of their dreaming. If the white men let them." What makes this so impactful both in the novel and today?
9. What do you think about Terrance Randall's fate?
10. How do you feel about Cora's mother's decision to run away? How does your opinion of Cora's mother change once you've learned about her fate?
11. Whitehead creates emotional instability for the reader: if things are going well, you get comfortable before a sudden tragedy. What does this sense of fear do to you as you're reading?
12. Who do you connect with most in the novel and why?
13. How does the state-by-state structure impact your reading process? Does it remind you of any other works of literature?

14. The book emphasizes how slaves were treated as property and reduced to objects. Do you feel that you now have a better understanding of what slavery was like?

15. Why do you think the author chose to portray a literal railroad? How did this aspect of magical realism impact your concept of how the real underground railroad worked?

16. Does *The Underground Railroad* change the way you look at the history of America, especially in the time of slavery and abolitionism?

(Questions issued by the publisher.)

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Colson Whitehead

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About this Person

Born: November 06, 1969 in New York, New York, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Novelist

Other Names: Whitehead, Arch Colson Chipp

Colson Whitehead is one of the most promising--and certainly one of the hippest--young writers on the literary scene today. A finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize and a regular on the *New York Times* best books list, Whitehead has been compared to such authors as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon. For his literary accomplishments, Whitehead received a coveted "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation in 2002, recognizing him as one of the nation's top creative minds and signaling that he is a writer to watch.

Colson Whitehead was born in 1969, one of four children of Arch and Mary Ann Whitehead, and grew up in New York City. He decided as early as age ten or eleven that "writing could be a cool job," he said to Tom Nolan in *Bookselling This Week*, and initially envisioned himself penning Spiderman comics or novels in the style of Steven King. His literary tastes matured as he went through high school, and as an English major at Harvard University he discovered such twentieth-century authors as Nathanael West, Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, and Thomas Pynchon, whom he described to Nolan as "very good models for me when I was trying to find my voice."

After completing his undergraduate degree at Harvard in 1991, Whitehead joined the staff of the *Village Voice*, first working on the *Voice Literary Supplement*--his duties included opening the mail--and then writing book reviews and television criticism. Working under the threat of constant deadlines forced Whitehead to develop the work habits of a professional writer, and after a few years he had the confidence to start writing fiction.

Whitehead's first novel, *The Intuitionist*, was published in 1999. Set in an unnamed eastern metropolis--clearly modeled on New York City--the book features protagonist Lily Mae Watson, an aging elevator inspector who is set up by her coworkers to take the blame for a fatal elevator crash. The plot turns on a conflict between two rival groups of inspectors: the empiricists, who use hands-on methods to detect mechanical problems in elevator systems, and the intuitionists, who gauge the psychic vibrations of an elevator instead of performing physical inspections. Watson, who is known as the "first colored woman in the Department of Elevator Inspectors," is among the latter camp. Inspired by the hard-boiled detective fiction of writers such as Dashiell Hammett, the novel is full of big-city corruption and backroom intrigue, and Watson emerges a heroine caught in the middle, in classic film noir style.

The critical response to Whitehead's debut work was enthusiastic. Gary Krist of the *New York Times* hailed the novel as "ingenious and starkly original," and *Publishers Weekly* called it "meaty and mythic," noting that Whitehead "has a completely original story to tell, and he tells it well." Writing for

Booklist, Donna Seaman situated *The Intuitionist* in a "literary lineage that includes Orwell, Ellison, Vonnegut, and Pynchon" and praised Whitehead's "shrewd and sardonic humor." *The Intuitionist* earned Whitehead the Quality Paperback Club's New Voices Award in 1999 and was a finalist for the Ernest Hemingway/PEN Award.

In 2001 Whitehead followed up with *John Henry Days*, which takes place in West Virginia on the occasion of a festival commemorating John Henry and the unveiling of a postage stamp in his honor. The book focuses on J. Sutter, a freeloading journalist who embarks on a junket of publicity events, alternating with narratives tracing the John Henry legend. Praised for its epic scope, the novel was a *New York Times* Editors' Choice and a finalist for both the Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and it earned Whitehead the New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award the following year.

Whitehead turned to nonfiction with his next book, *The Colossus of New York: A City in Thirteen Stories*, published in 2003. Begun in 2000 as a side project while the author worked on a third novel, the collection took shape as Whitehead wandered about New York City with notebook in hand, writing down "speculations, observations, and impressions" that he later turned into essays. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the project took on new meaning as New Yorkers, Whitehead among them, grappled with what had happened to their city. "Part of writing is trying to make sense of the world," Whitehead explained to Felicia R. Lee in the *New York Times*. "With a personal book like 'Colossus' I was trying to figure out what discrete moments meant to me, to other people. Is there a community? How do we create community?"

Returning to fiction once again, Whitehead published two more novels: *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), featuring a "nomenclature expert" who is hired to rename a town, and *Sag Harbor* (2009), an autobiographical coming-of-age story. In the latter, Whitehead returns to the memory of summers spent on Long Island during the 1980s in a first-person narrative--written from the perspective of thirteen-year-old Benji Cooper--that is a departure from his previous work. "When I was starting out, I was too self-conscious to leave any explicitly personal traces in my work," he told Craig Morgan Teicher in *Time Out New York*. "Everybody does a first novel that has an autobiographical aspect.... So my main impulse with my first book ... was to be different and weird and not do what I saw as being obvious.... I'm older now, less squeamish about having overt aspects of my experience in my books."

Less conceptual than his previous novels, *Sag Harbor* earned praise from critics for its sensitive and detailed evocation of a particular moment in time and of the agonies and ecstasies of its teenage protagonist. "Whitehead has tapped the most classic summer-novel activity of all: nostalgia. It doesn't matter if nothing much happens in *Sag Harbor*.... The pleasure is in the way Whitehead recalls it, in loving and lingering detail," wrote Radhika Jones in *Time*. Adam Mansbach in the *Boston Globe* likewise noted, "It is Whitehead's most enjoyable book--warm and funny, carefully observed, and beautifully written, studded with small moments of pain and epiphany."

Whitehead's next novel was entirely different from anything he'd tried in the past. *ZONE One* was published in 2011 and focused on the rebuilding of Manhattan after a plague has struck and receded. Though many survived, many more died--and came back to life. Now the infected and the uninfected roam the same streets, but are not governed by the same laws. When asked why he chooses a different subject matter for each book, Whitehead told the *Guardian*, "I was a big horror and science fiction fan growing up. My brother and I would rent horror movies every weekend and in junior high I was reading Stephen King and Isaac Asimov. It was those guys who made me want to write in the first place, so it made sense to me that I would eventually do a horror novel, even if it seems strange going from a coming-of-age story like my last novel, *Sag Harbor*, to a zombie apocalypse. Zombies are a great rhetorical prop to talk about people and paranoia and they are a good vehicle for my misanthropy."

Whitehead has garnered many accolades for his fiction. In 2000 he received the Whiting Writers' Award, which is given each year to the most promising emerging writers, and in 2002 the John D. and

Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation named Whitehead as one of its twenty-four fellows. The prestigious "genius grant," as it is known, recognizes individuals who demonstrate exceptional creativity, insight, and potential. The fellowship comes with a \$500,000 award, paid out over five years, which may be used in any way the recipient chooses. Lee noted that the MacArthur Foundation singled out Whitehead as a "bold experimental writer whose social and philosophical themes speak to the heart of American society."

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born in 1969 in New York, NY; son of Arch Whitehead and Mary Ann Whitehead; married Natasha Stovall in 2000; children: Madeline. **Education:** Harvard University, BA, English, 1991. **Addresses:** Office--c/o Doubleday, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. Web--<http://www.colsonwhitehead.com>.

CAREER:

Village Voice, writer and television critic, 1990s.

AWARDS:

New Voices Award, Quality Paperback Club, 1999; Whiting Writers' Award, 2000; John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship, 2002; Young Lions Fiction Award, New York Public Library, 2002.

WORKS:

Selected works

- *The Intuitionist*, Anchor Books, 1999.
- *John Henry Days*, Doubleday, 2001.
- *The Colossus of New York: A City in Thirteen Parts*, Doubleday, 2003.
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- *Sag Harbor*, Doubleday, 2009.
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AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

Colson Whitehead's 'Underground Railroad' Is A Literal Train To Freedom

November 18, 2016 · 1:43 PM ET

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Whitehead was recently awarded the National Book Award for his novel about a young slave who has escaped a Georgia plantation and is heading north. *Originally broadcast Aug. 8, 2016.*

Hear the Original Interview



AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

Colson Whitehead's 'Underground Railroad' Is A Literal Train To Freedom

DAVID BIANCULLI, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm David Bianculli, editor of the website TV Worth Watching, sitting in for Terry Gross. Today, we're saluting two authors whose works were honored this week as recipients of the National Book Award. Later in the show, we'll replay an interview from longtime Georgia congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis, who co-wrote this year's winner in the Young People's Literature category. But

first, we'll listen back to Terry's interview from earlier this year with Colson Whitehead, who won the National Book Award for Fiction for his bestselling novel "The Underground Railroad." "The Underground Railroad" is about a slave named Cora who grows up on a Georgia plantation and, at the age of 15, escapes through the Underground Railroad. This Underground Railroad, in Whitehead's reimagining, is literally a railroad with underground tracks and locomotives making stops in different states. That's one of many liberties Colson takes with the actual past. Whitehead previously joined us on FRESH AIR to talk about his novel "Zone One," about a zombie plague - he loves science fiction - and his memoir "The Noble Hustle," about high-stakes poker. His new novel, "The Underground Railroad," begins with a prologue of sorts, telling the story of Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, who was kidnapped from her African village and shipped to America to become a slave.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED BROADCAST)

TERRY GROSS, HOST:

Colson Whitehead, welcome back to FRESH AIR. Let's start with a reading from "The Underground Railroad."

COLSON WHITEHEAD: Sounds good. This is the first page. (Reading) The first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no. This was her grandmother talking. Cora's grandmother had never seen the ocean before that bright afternoon in the port of Ouidah. And the water dazzled after her time in the fort's dungeon. The dungeon stored them until the ships arrived. Dahomeyan raiders kidnapped the men first then returned to her village the next moon for the women and children, marching them in chains to the sea two-by-two. As she stared into the black doorway, Ajarry thought she'd be reunited with her father down there in the dark. The survivors from her village told her that when her father couldn't keep the pace of the long march, the slavers stove in his head and left his body by the trail. Her mother had died years before. Cora's grandmother was sold a few times on the trek to the fort, passed between slavers for cowry shells and glass beads. It was hard to say how much they paid for her in Ouidah, as she was part of a bulk purchase, 88 human souls for 60 crates of rum and gunpowder, the price arrived upon after the standard haggling in Coast English. Able-bodied men and childbearing women fetched more than juveniles,

making an individual accounting difficult. The ship called The Nanny was out of Liverpool and had made two previous stops along the Gold Coast. The captain staggered his purchases, rather than find himself with a cargo of singular culture and disposition. Who knew what brand of mutiny his captives might cook up if they shared a common tongue? This was the ship's final port of call before they crossed the Atlantic. Two yellow-haired sailors rode Ajarry out to the ship - humming, white skin like bone.

GROSS: That's from the opening of Colson Whitehead's new novel "The Underground Railroad." Why did you want to write a novel about slavery and escaped slaves? Had something happened in your life that made you want to immerse yourself in that history?

WHITEHEAD: Actually, I was pretty reluctant to immerse myself into that history. It took 16 years for me to finish the book. I first had the idea in the year 2000, and I was finishing up a long book called "John Henry Days," which had a lot of research. And I was just sort of, you know, getting up from a nap or something (laughter) and thought, you know, what if the Underground Railroad was an actual railroad? You know, I think when you're a kid and you first hear about it in school or whatever, you imagine a literal subway beneath the earth. And then you find out that it's not a literal subway, and you get a bit upset. And so the book took off from that childhood notion. And that's a premise, not that much of a story. So I kept thinking about it. And I thought, well, what if every state our hero went through - as he or she ran North - was a different state of American possibility? So Georgia has one sort of take on America and North Carolina - sort of like "Gulliver's Travels." The book is rebooting every time the person goes to a different state.

GROSS: So one of the stops Cora, the escaped slave, goes to on the Underground Railroad is South Carolina, where they think of themselves as very progressive. Why do they think of themselves that way?

WHITEHEAD: Well, you know, they've thought about the problem of slavery and how to fix it. And so they're buying slaves from slave owners and freeing them and giving them jobs and housing and schooling and giving them a fresh start. You know, the first chapter of the book is a, hopefully, realistic portrayal of a plantation in Georgia. And

it's the kind of plantation we recognize from history and pop culture. And then she takes the Underground Railroad and emerges in South Carolina, where there is this seemingly progressive government devoted to black uplift and various social programs. But of course, because it's the start of the book, things don't turn out that great. And there's a sinister purpose behind all of these progressive programs they're giving to the colored folk who have come to South Carolina.

GROSS: And you've based some of this on actual history. I mean, without giving away too much, there's a medical program that seems like it would be very helpful, but they're really conducting a syphilis study and using black people as guinea pigs.

WHITEHEAD: Yeah. I think, you know, once I made the choice to make a literal underground railroad, you know, it freed me up to play with time a bit more. And so, in general, you know, the technology, culture and speech is from the year 1850. That was my sort of mental cutoff for technology and slang. But it allowed me to bring in things that didn't happen in 1850 - skyscrapers, aspects of the eugenics movement, forced sterilization and the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. And it's all presented sort of matter-of-factly...

GROSS: Yeah, can I quote something...

WHITEHEAD: ...Hopefully.

GROSS: ...From the book about the forced sterilization program? One of the characters says, (reading) America has imported and bred so many Africans that, in many states, the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With strategic sterilization, first the women, but both sexes in time, we could free them from bondage without fear that they'd butcher us in our sleep.

WHITEHEAD: Yeah. I mean, that's taken - you know, it's - part of that is from late 19th-century eugenics literature and also - and then taken also from early 19th-century racist literature, people who, you know, perhaps rightly, were afraid that if (laughter) - if black people were freed, they would exact retribution. You know, they were outnumbered. They'd been breeding slaves. And then you wake up one day and, like,

actually, we're outnumbered by these people that we torture, brutalize and subjugate. So not sticking to the facts allowed me to combine different forms of racial hysteria.

GROSS: In South Carolina, there's something called the Museum of Natural Wonders that Cora, the escaped slave, ends up working in. And it's described to her as having a focus on American history. And one of the people who runs it says the museum permits people to see the rest of the country and to see its people, people like you. And why don't you describe what some of the rooms in this museum are?

WHITEHEAD: Sure. Cora is a living exhibit, and so she stands in a display case all day along with two other former slaves, and they rotate through these different tableaux. One is scenes from darkest Africa, and that's a seemingly realistic depiction of life back in the motherland. And so there's a little hut and some gourds and some spears, and they pretend to interact with them. There's a scene on a slave ship where Cora is sort of happily swabbing - and not below decks in chains, as she would have been. And then there's life on a plantation, where she's happily sewing and not being whipped in the fields and otherwise abused by a master. And so the museum presents this false, sanitized version of American life for the nice white people of South Carolina who come to see it.

GROSS: You've been describing her life in South Carolina. When she gets back on the Underground Railroad and gets off on the next stop, it's North Carolina, which is a real contrast to South Carolina. Could you describe a little bit about the laws in North Carolina?

WHITEHEAD: North Carolina, as she discovers, doesn't put up a false front of it's, you know, true intent. In order to solve the problem of slavery, they've outlawed all black people. And so if you're - have dark skin and you're found in North Carolina, you can be lynched, executed. And so it's a white separatist-supremacist state, much in the way that towns in Oregon, when they were being settled, were settled on a white separatist-supremacist ideal. So, again, it's taking, you know, aspects of American history and then taking them to a certain extreme. That section in North Carolina was inspired by one of the more better-known slave narratives, Harriet Jacobs' "Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl." And she was in North Carolina and fled her abusive master, who had sexual designs upon her, and hid seven years in an attic until she could be - get

passage out of town. So Cora is trapped in an attic that overlooks the town park, and every Friday, there's a happy lynching festival where they execute the latest - the latest black person who's been caught up in their program of genocide. It's a - that's a (laughter) kind of a bit of a - I guess if I put it that way, it sounds a bit bleak.

GROSS: A bit?

(LAUGHTER)

GROSS: Perhaps.

(LAUGHTER)

WHITEHEAD: Yeah. I mean, the thing about, you know, living with the book and then talking about it and boiling it down, it's very different than how I've lived with it for so long to say the least, yeah.

GROSS: What's some of the slang or other language that you got from reading slave narratives or reading the WPA oral histories?

WHITEHEAD: Well, I mean, you know, one person's just, like, yeah, once a year, we'd get a new pair of wooden shoes from master. I was, like, you wore wooden shoes? I mean, that's - it was grueling and mind-boggling to just go back 200 years and think about people lived and the conditions, the food - you know, just a biscuit in the morning and then you have to work for 10 hours in the hot sun under the fear of being, you know, beaten. And I think in the years where I mulled writing the book - should I write it now, or should I not do it? - you know, part of it was the fear of, you know, confronting the reality of slavery. And once I started doing the research, I realized how much I was going to have to put my protagonist and all her friends through. And that became a different level of being daunted by how my great-great-grandparents lived and struggled.

BIANCULLI: Author Colson Whitehead speaking to Terry Gross earlier this year. His novel, "The Underground Railroad," just won the National Book Award for fiction. More after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BIANCULLI: This is FRESH AIR. Let's return to Terry's interview from earlier this year with Colson Whitehead. His novel "The Underground Railroad," in which he reimagines events during the period of slavery in America, has just received the National Book Award for fiction.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED BROADCAST)

GROSS: You know, toward the end of the book, one of the character - you know, they're talking about what to do and how to help black people and who can be helped and who maybe can't be helped, so let's not spend the energy trying to save them. And so one character says, we're not all going to make it. Some of us are too far gone. Slavery has twisted their minds, an imp filling their minds with foul ideas. They've given themselves over to whiskey and its false comforts, to hopelessness and its constant devils. Those who will not cannot respect themselves. It's too late for them. So it's this debate. It's, like, is it too late for someone? And a character says, we can't save everyone, but that doesn't mean we can't try. Here's one delusion - that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade. And to me, like, that's what the book is really about, how the scars of slavery will never fade.

WHITEHEAD: That's a debate that was going on in the 1800s - how do we create a program of black uplift? Some of those have been so damaged by slavery that they'll never be teachers, doctors. Who can we save? And there are echoes in that argument, obviously, now. I mean, people, say - people are addicted to crack, they're on welfare, you know, they're too far gone to be saved. And it didn't take a lot of energy to find parallels for the language of the slave problem and the inner-city problem, all those debates still, you know, with different sort of coded language. But, yes, the legacy of slavery reverberates in Jim Crow laws, separate but equal, institutionalized racism, the incarceration state - all the things that the people in "The Underground Railroad" are struggling with, have parallels, echoes today. When I learned about slave patrollers - slave patrollers in the early 1800s were the de facto police force in the South. And it was their job to catch runaway slaves and make sure that any black person walking down the street had their papers. And they could stop, detain any black person, demand to see their papers. And, of course, if you were - didn't have license to move

around freely, you were beaten, taken back to your master, jailed. It was just an early version of stop and frisk. And, of course, growing up in a city, I'm acquainted with stop and frisk, with being pulled over by cops, with being handcuffed and questioned as I'm going about my business - obviously not every day, but it's a common occurrence for most black people in America.

GROSS: When were you handcuffed?

WHITEHEAD: I was in high school. And I was in a grocery store, and a policeman came up to me and said, put your hands behind your back. And I was taken out to the police car and a white woman had been mugged a few blocks away. And I guess I was the only black teenager - or probably the first black teenager the police had found. And she was like that's not him, and they let me go. But...

GROSS: What did you say to the police?

WHITEHEAD: Well, I'd been prepared by my father, who had told me that, you know, whenever I leave the house I'm a target. And if I'm in the wrong neighborhood, I can be lynched. You don't call it lynching, but, you know, in '80s there were various cases of young black men wandering just a wrong neighborhood in Brooklyn and getting beaten or killed. So, you know, I'd been prepared by my father. You know, that's the narrative of black life. But that was the first time I'd had such a first, you know - (laughter) the real - the true introduction to it, which is, you know, being handcuffed and interrogated by cops.

GROSS: Did your parents register a formal complaint?

WHITEHEAD: (Laughter) When I told my father, like, a week later, he was like, you didn't get their badge number? And I was like, you know, it didn't occur to me. And he was - you know, it was the confirmation of his fear that he had each time I left the house anyway. And then also to know that there is no opportunity of redress upset him. And I was sort of - you know, I can do that. I actually have the agency to ask for a badge number. I'm not sure if they tell you (laughter) if you ask. So, you know, it made my 16-year-old head spin.

GROSS: So you waited a week to tell your parents (laughter).

WHITEHEAD: Yeah. Well, I was going to buy - on the way to a party and buying beer. So (laughter) I think that...

GROSS: Right.

WHITEHEAD: ...Registered more from me than - anyway.

GROSS: You've described your parents of being - as being of the civil rights generation. Did your parents talk with you about family history in terms of race? Did they know anything about your family ancestors and their slave lives?

WHITEHEAD: Well, yeah, I mean, you know, race isn't separate from family history. It's, you know, it's all one thing. So, you know, my grandmother came from Barbados in the 1920s. And that was a big sugar plantation island. And I think - when cotton became the focus of slavery in the States, they took lessons from the Caribbean system, which was brutal - much more brutal than what we/they had at the time. And so that's one kind of slavery. And then there's - my mother, on one side, had free people of color who had a tavern in Virginia, and on the other side, on, you know, her father's side, came from, you know, slave stock in Virginia. So once you start going back a hundred years, there are different kinds of slave experience that, you know, people were forced to endure. I can't say that we - my parents talked about slavery every day. It was more about, I think, being aware of how racist the country is and how do you deal with it and how can you live a happy life in a country that's so sort of twisted and screwed up, if that makes sense.

GROSS: Did writing the book affect your approach to parenting and what you wanted to tell your children, like how much you want them to know about African-American history, how much you want them to know about slavery, about how that helps explain a lot of the conflicts that we're having now, a lot of the racism that exists - that still exists in the country now?

WHITEHEAD: Well, yeah, I mean, they're very young, and I'm not sure when they're going to be ready to read my books. I mean, I think, you know, my daughter who's 11

sort of picked up on the excitement of how people were reacting to the book. And I gave her a copy. And she started it and I think made a couple pages in, honestly (laughter) you know, before she stopped. And she's not used to reading more adult fiction. And I think, you know, hopefully she'll come back to it when she's a little older and she'll be able to process it. But I remember, you know, when Obama was elected, you know, I didn't wear a tie very often. I put on a tie for some event, and she was like, you look like the president, Daddy. And, you know, that's her idea of a person in a tie is the president. And so she's taken certain things for granted. I, you know, took my parents' struggles, their triumphs for granted. And, you know, as you get older and you're making your own sacrifices and making your way in the world, you know, I think most people appreciate what their parents went through.

BIANCULLI: Colson Whitehead, author of "The Underground Railroad," speaking to Terry Gross earlier this year. After a short break, we'll continue their conversation, then visit with another new National Book Award winner, congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis. I'm David Bianculli, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BIANCULLI: This is FRESH AIR. I'm David Bianculli, in for Terry Gross, back with more of Terry's interview from earlier this year with Colson Whitehead. He's the author of "The Underground Railroad," a novel that tells the story of a runaway slave and reimagines the pre-Civil War South. On Wednesday, it won the National Book Award for fiction.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED BROADCAST)

GROSS: In your novel, there are several ads for escaped slaves offering bounties for them. Are any of those taken from actual ads for escaped slaves?

WHITEHEAD: The ones in the book are classified advertisements from newspapers, estate masters advertising...

GROSS: They're real ones?

WHITEHEAD: Yeah, they're real. They're advertising, you know, be on the lookout for my slave Bessie. She has a scar on her neck. She ran away for some reason. I'm not sure why. And, you know, I mean, I like being a mimic when I'm writing. But then sometimes you can't compete with the actual historical document. And so the University of North Carolina digitized these runaway slave classifieds from newspapers at the early part of the 19th century. There is five of them, and, you know, the first four are mostly verbatim from newspapers. And then the fifth one is Cora's, and that's one I created for her, hopefully being true to her story.

GROSS: Well, why don't you read one of the ones that are - that is largely real for us, that, you know, by real I mean you got it from the original text.

WHITEHEAD: Yes, and so these ran in newspapers, and here is one. (Reading) Thirty dollars reward will be given to any person who will deliver to me, or confine in any jail in the state so that I can get her again, a likely yellow Negro girl, 18 years of age, who ran away nine months past. She's an artfully lively girl and will no doubt attempt to pass as a free person, has a noticeable scar on her elbow occasioned by a burn. I've been informed she is lurking in and about Edenton. Benjamin P. Wells, Murfreesboro, January 5, 1812. Was that, like...

GROSS: What goes through your mind when you read that?

WHITEHEAD: I read it aloud, I think, am I doing a good Ken Burns narrator-like...

(LAUGHTER)

WHITEHEAD: ...Rendition? And then, you know, you realize that there's so many aspects of slavery you don't think about. And one of it is just like when your slave runs away, what do you do? Well, you put an ad in a newspaper the same way that you put an ad for a lost cat in the laundromat. And you describe them - she has a burn on her elbow. And you give characteristics so she can be identified and then offer money for a reward. And so, you know, it's property. It's your lost pet that you're trying to, you know, get back. And, you know, and there would just be a page full of, you know, 20 ads like, find my escaped slave. And some of them are totally clueless, obviously, like she left for no reason at, you know (laughter) probably for a good reason, or, you

know, she has a downcast expression. I wonder why she has a downcast expression - because you've brutalized her for her whole life. I guess it's the banality of evil. There was a process for everything. There was a system. And everything's accounted for, even what do you do when your slave escapes? You pay, you know, five bucks to the newspaper so that you can get her back.

GROSS: So I'm going to take a little detour here.

WHITEHEAD: Sure.

GROSS: Your grandfather owned a chain of funeral homes in New Jersey. Did you grow up with a lot of conversations about death and dead bodies?

WHITEHEAD: You know, well (laughter) my parents - he passed away when I was very young. And my - but my mother was raised, you know - if you've seen "Six Feet Under," the family lives in the house where they do the services and do the embalming. And that's - that was her setup. So she grew up having to run the house. And in the basement, that's where all the dead bodies were and where all the prep work went on. And so - so, you know, the business is still in the family. Her sisters run it in New Jersey. There was a lot of talk about death in our house because we all love horror movies. And so the family ritual on Thanksgiving, we'd have a nice big dinner of turkey and then watch two splatter movies.

(LAUGHTER)

WHITEHEAD: So death came from our communal love of horror - horror movies, you know.

GROSS: Well, one of your books, "Zone One," is about a zombie plague in New York. And I'm wondering if being exposed to discussion of preparing dead bodies for funerals, you know, for burial, played into your interest in zombies.

WHITEHEAD: No. My mom - you know, my mom talks about it with a sort of horrified delight about sneaking down - sneaking down to the basement and, you know, taking a peek at all the implements and the preparation tables. You know, in terms of "Zone One," you know, it comes out from watching horror movies, you know,

with my family. When I saw "Night Of The Living Dead," when I - I saw it when I was very young and struck by the fact that there was a black protagonist. He's the one sane person in a story, and I hadn't seen a lot of movies with black heroes at that point. And so I think that stayed with me over the years. There seemed to be a way in which a black person trying to navigate the world as white mobs are trying to tear him limb from limb was a compelling story and also a way of commenting on America. And so that's in "Zone One," And I think it's definitely in a more overt way in "The Underground Railroad."

GROSS: Well, Colson Whitehead, thank you so much for talking with us and coming back to FRESH AIR.

WHITEHEAD: It was a lot of fun, thanks.

BIANCULLI: Colson Whitehead, author of "The Underground Railroad," speaking to Terry Gross earlier this year. His novel just won the National Book Award for fiction. After a short break, we'll hear from another new National Book Award recipient, Georgia congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis. This is FRESH AIR.

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The author of *The Underground Railroad* on slavery, privilege and why he took 15 years to tackle the idea that won him a Pulitzer prize

Fri 7 Jul 2017 06.59 EDT

Colson Whitehead was six months into writing a novel about the digital economy when he was seized by the ghost of an old idea. The 47-year-old, who was a reviewer for the *Village Voice* in his 20s and had since published five novels and two non-fiction books, was in, as he puts it, the perennially gloomy mood that is his baseline when writing. “I usually have two or three ideas floating around,” he says. “When I have free time, the one I end up thinking most about is the one I end up pursuing.” Reluctantly, he put aside the nascent novel, on the basis that a satire about digital media was something “a 27-year-old hipster would be better equipped to deal with”, and turned to the other idea.

The book Whitehead ended up writing was *The Underground Railroad*, the story of Cora, a 15-year-old slave who escapes from a plantation in Georgia. It would come to be published in 40 languages, win a Pulitzer prize and a National Book award and be anointed by Oprah. The TV rights have been bought by Barry Jenkins - the man behind the Oscar-winning movie *Moonlight* - and for the past six months Whitehead has undergone a transformation. "Generally, I walk around in a glum mood," he says. "But I've been in a really good mood for the last year. So, that's new, and a nice feature." Will glumness descend again? "Eventually," he laughs. "I assume that, once I get into a new book, I'll revert to my usual average temperature. But I've definitely been enjoying it. It seems like a once-in-a-lifetime thing. I'll put some money aside to put my kids through college, buy some new shirts and generally walk around in a good mood."

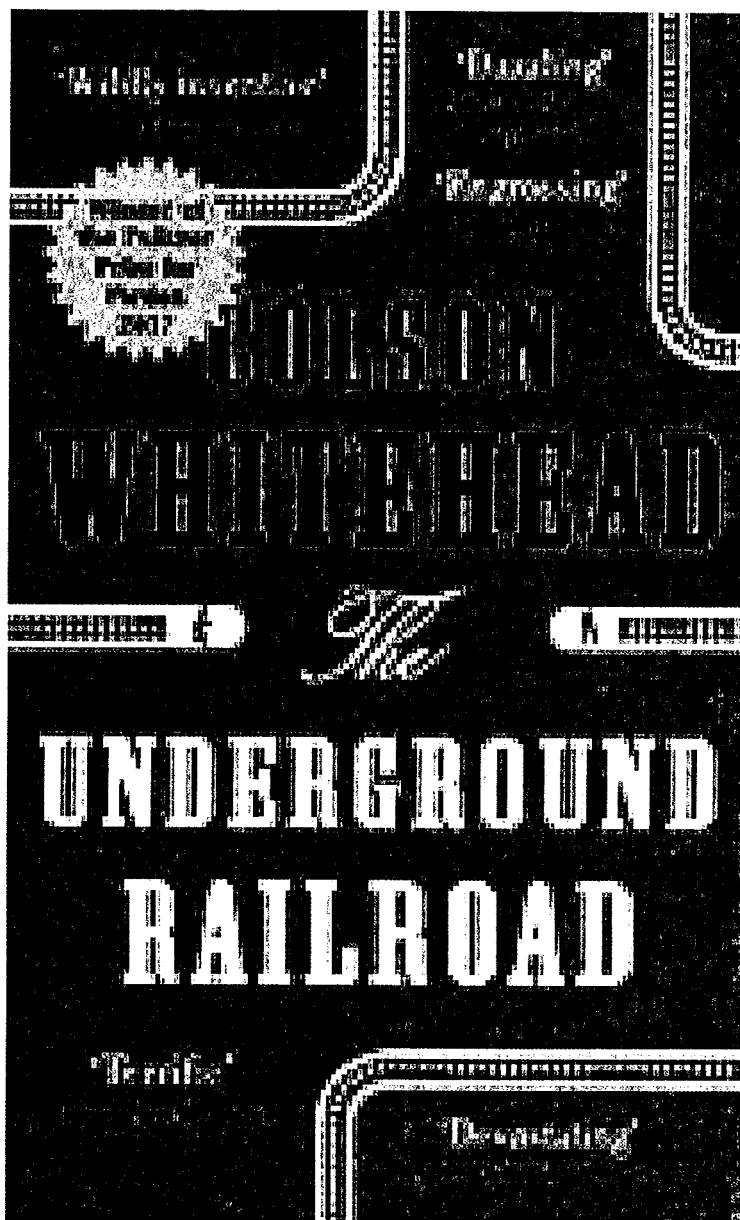
We are in a cafe near Whitehead's home in downtown Manhattan, where he lives with his wife, Julie Barer, a literary agent, and the couple's three-year-old child. He has a 12-year-old daughter from his first marriage. Whitehead grew up in Manhattan, one of four children of successful entrepreneur parents. His 2009 novel, *Sag Harbor*, detailed with humour the experience of being a kid in Manhattan's private-school world, with a fancy summer home in the Hamptons. It was a position of privilege considered so unavailable to African Americans that the parents of white classmates would speculate about whether he and his brother were African princes.

"Bougie" is the word he uses to describe that world, which he went through a period of disparaging and attempting to distance himself from. "Posh," he says, by way of translation. "Upscale; bourgeois values. The whole constellation of satisfied, complacent, et voilà."

It didn't occur to him to be embarrassed about having gone to private school - Trinity, on the west side of Manhattan - but all those summers at his parents' house in Sag Harbor, in the Hamptons, were something else. "Once I got to college, it seemed that the Hamptons were a little bit too posh for me and didn't represent the kind of values I was embracing in my late teens. So, I didn't go out there, except to visit my parents, for a long time. And then, after 9/11" - he starts laughing - "I discovered it was a nice, mellow place to hang out."

Whitehead's parents ran an executive recruitment firm and were less than delighted when he announced a desire to become a writer. Apart from anything else, it was out of character. Until he went to Harvard, says Whitehead, he had been a "goody-goody" and done everything his parents expected of him. They expected him to go into a profession. Then, at college, he changed. "I started to rebel in this passive-aggressive way, by sleeping in late and stuff like that." What kind of student was he? "I was available to hang out," he says drily. "The department of English at that time was very conservative. I think we had one class on literature written after the second world war. So I would take classes in the theatre department - not acting, but studying plays - and in the African American studies department, which then was pretty moribund, before Henry Louis Gates got there. I wasn't a particularly ambitious student. I played cards. Poker and bridge. But that's where I first encountered James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon and a lot of the great books that I still refer to in terms of inspiration and structure."

In 2014, Whitehead wrote a memoir about poker, *The Noble Hustle*, which was expanded from a magazine article based on seven days he spent in Las Vegas taking part in the World Series of Poker. It has one of the best subtitles ever: *Poker, Beef Jerky and Death*. He is good at opening lines, too: *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead's experimental first novel, which is set in an elevator inspection service, opens with the Don DeLillo-ish: "It's a new elevator, freshly pressed to the rails, and it's not built to fall this fast."



Extraordinary success ... The Underground Railroad. Photograph: PR

Writing was something Whitehead had done since he was 10 or 11, inspired by the wide range of books in his house. “Commercial literary fiction; John Updike and Stephen King; Norman Mailer and Judith Krantz. I had two older sisters, and every book brought into the house I would eventually inherit. So it meant reading Tom Wolfe and *The Bell Jar* and horror and comics – all stuff that made me want to write. And Jackie Collins. We always knew what to get [my sisters] at Christmas, because she always had a book come out on 10 December.”

Nonetheless, after graduating, when Whitehead told his parents that he wanted to become a journalist, “they told me journalists make \$14,000 a year. Which seemed like a lot to me, frankly. But they wanted me to become a lawyer or a doctor or have some upstanding job. It wasn’t until my first book was finally out and they could hold it in their hand and it was being reviewed that they would stop urging me to get a real job.” The idea for *The Underground Railroad* came to Whitehead early – in 2000, in the wake of his first book being published. He wrote *The Intuitionist* while doing reviews for the Village Voice and later as a more wide-ranging freelance writer. Those grungy years were instructive, says Whitehead. “The job at the Village Voice was 35 cents a word, so it wasn’t that high profile. But once you were in the paper you could write for different sections

and they really gave you a chance if you were in the building every day and under foot. And being a freelancer gave me the time to start working on fiction, and the confidence of living from writing gave me more confidence.” He pauses. “Even though that was foolish.”

His youthful confidence had its limitations, however. When he came up with the concept that would become *The Underground Railroad*, it was different from what appeared in the final version of the novel. He knew he wanted to write about the channels that helped slaves escape from plantations in the south to the north. He knew he wanted it to include an element of magical realism – in this case, the conversion of the figurative railroad, the network of safe houses via which escaped slaves passed, into an actual subway system. He also thought his principal character would be a young, single man, as he was at the time. That was as far as he got.

“When I had the idea in 2000, it seemed like a good idea, but I didn’t think I could pull it off,” he says. “I didn’t think I was a good enough writer. I thought if I wrote some more books I might become a better craftsman and, if I was older, I might be able to bring the maturity of some of those years to the book and do it justice. And so I shied away from it. It was daunting in terms

of its structure, and to do the research as deep as it needed to be done, and to deal with the subject with the gravity it deserved, was scary. And then, a couple of years ago, I thought maybe the scary book is the one you're supposed to be doing."

The heroine became not a man in his mid-20s, but Cora, a teenage girl following in her runaway mother's footsteps. The most striking section of the book is the intensely realistic opening portrait, of life on the plantation before Cora's escape, in which Whitehead focuses on the relationships between slaves, so often sentimentalised in shallower depictions of slavery. He says: "Writing it now, the question was: 'How can I make a psychologically credible plantation?' And that means thinking about people who've been traumatised, brutalised and dehumanised their whole lives. It's not going to be the pop culture plantation where there's one Uncle Tom and everyone is just really helpful to each other. Everyone is going to be fighting for the one extra bite of food in the morning, fighting for the small piece of property. To me, that makes sense; if you put people together who've been raped and tortured, that's how they would act."

There were two crucial scenes that brought Cora to life in his mind, he says: when she stands up to a fellow slave, a bully who tries to take away the only thing that is hers, a tiny patch of dirt she calls her garden; and when she tries to protect Chester, a child, from the wrath of the slavemaster. "Writing in 2015 and imagining what kind of heroic desperation could lead someone to leave a plantation is hard. For me, those two moments spoke to who she was and what she'd do to preserve herself."

Whitehead spent a long time on the research for the book, ploughing through oral history archives, in particular the 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery collected by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s, when, incredibly, the last survivors of slavery were in their 90s. While he was at school, he says, education on slavery had been pitifully inadequate. "In fifth grade, we did 10 minutes on slavery and 40 minutes on Abraham Lincoln, and in 10th grade you might do 10 minutes on the civil rights era and 40 minutes on Martin Luther King and that's it. I think it's probably better now. But there's no reason for the powers that be to address that part of history."



Whitehead at the 2017 Time 100 Gala in New York. Photograph: Jemal Countess/Getty Images/TIME

Whitehead also wanted to write more generally about parents and children. Having children himself put the imagined experience of slavery in an even more intolerable light. Cora is galvanised by her love for, and fury at, her mother, Mabel. "Mabel provides on the one hand an example of someone who can run away successfully, we think, and also the counter example of someone who abandons their child to the hell of slavery. And both of those things warp Cora's

perceptions and drive different behaviours in the book. When we find out what happens to Mabel, I wanted to address the gap between what we know of our parents and who they really are.”

What happened to Mabel is the great shock of the book, the artful suspense around which drives much of the narrative. I ask if Whitehead felt squeamish about deploying the customary tricks of the novelist when the subject matter is so traumatic. “I’ve written books that are more resistant to readers and books that are slow and defy the pleasures of plot. *Sag Harbor*, which is about growing up in the 80s, is a portrait of a summer; there’s no driving plot. But, with this book, I think the life-or-death stakes - if she was caught, she would be put to death - called for a different approach to some other books. I was aware of the conventions of a suspenseful book and of withholding information; red herrings and distracting the reader. And I think the plot, like humour, or what kind of narrator you have, is just a tool you use for the right story at the right time.”

Whitehead is currently recharging. He teaches creative writing on and off at Princeton and NYU and has written 32 pages of a new book. He is in no hurry. The extraordinary success of *The Underground Railroad* will, he predicts, take up much of his time until early next year. “I value my downtime. I usually take a year or a year and a half between stuff, whether it’s staring off into space or bingeing on a TV show or a video game for a month. I also work when I’m working, but I think my wife was concerned when we first got together that I sat around all the time.”

And then what? He smiles. “And then the self-loathing kicks in and I have to get back to work.”

The Underground Railroad is published by Little, Brown. To order a copy for £6.79 (RRP £7.99) go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.

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